

The Immateriality Slide

Conscious Experience, Embodied Affect, and the Misclassification of the Spiritual

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Central claim

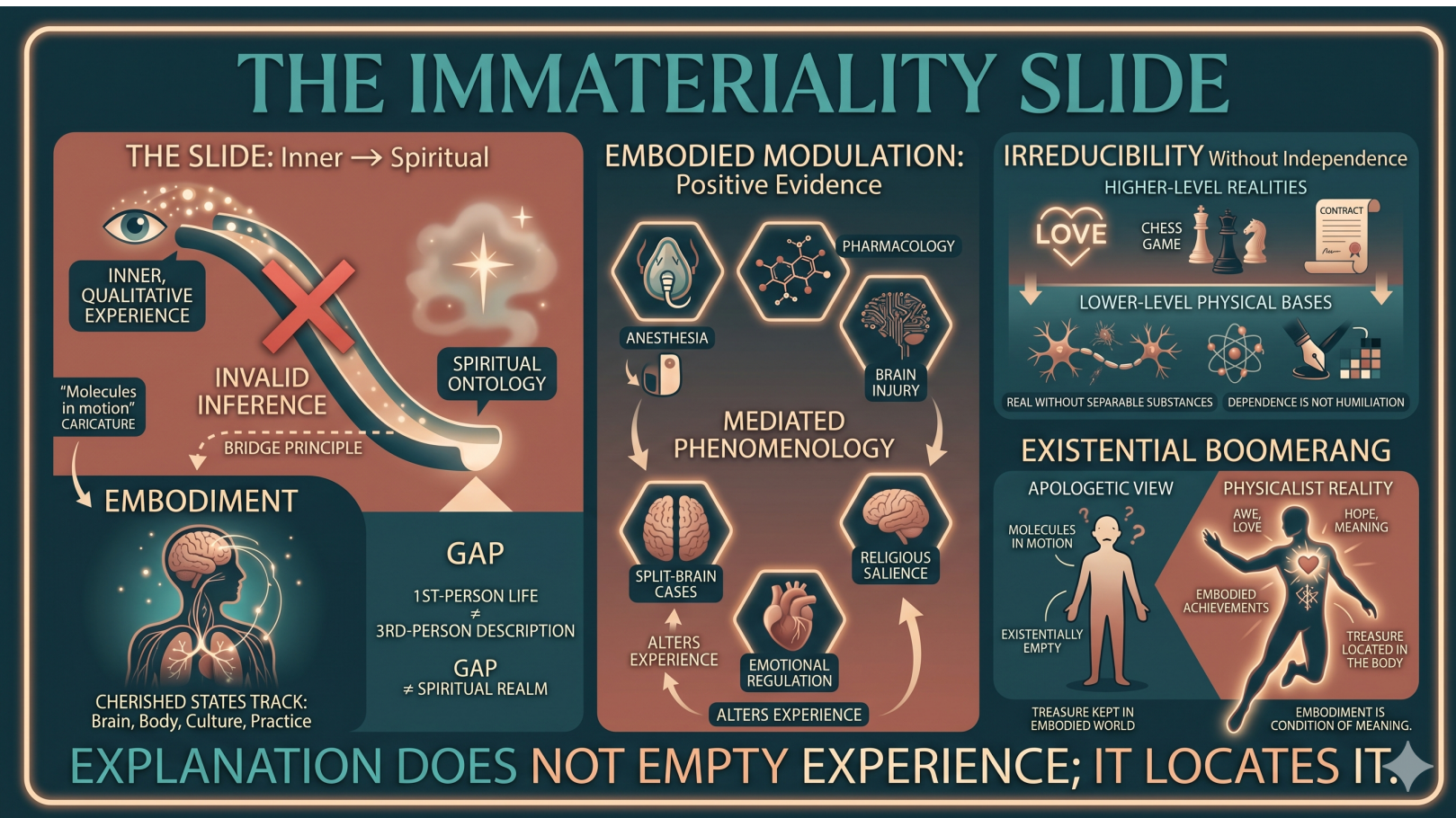
The felt depth and first-person character of love, awe, reason, or religious experience do not by themselves support an independent spiritual ontology. These states vary systematically with brains, bodies, drugs, development, practice, and culture, while the bridge from irreducibility to independence remains undefended. That pattern favors embodied-dependence accounts over the apologetic shortcut, without proving exhaustive physicalism or refuting every dualist theory.

Preview:

Apologetic move	Needed bridge	Public evidence	Rational result
Inner, valuable, or irreducible experience is labeled spiritual.	First-person depth must discriminate an independent spiritual source from embodiment.	Cherished states track neural, bodily, pharmacological, social, and interpretive conditions.	Embodiment explains the dependence; spirituality needs further evidence and cannot be inferred from depth alone.

The conclusion rejects a particular evidential shortcut. It leaves open the hard problem of consciousness, nonreductive physicalisms, dualist proposals with independent support, and religious interpretations that do not treat phenomenology alone as public proof.

Visual preview:



Left: the slide from inner life to spiritual ontology and its missing bridge. Center: embodied modulation of conscious states. Right: higher-level reality without separable substance and the existential contrast. The map presents the argumentative burden; it does not claim that dependence settles every metaphysical question.

Abstract

Popular Christian apologetics sometimes caricatures physicalism as the claim that persons are merely “molecules in motion.” The contrast is meant to do more than identify a metaphysical disagreement. It suggests that love, rational inference, moral seriousness, awe, and religious experience would be unreal or untrustworthy if physically realized, then treats their evident depth as support for an immaterial soul or spiritual realm. This paper argues that the move equivocates among four different claims: an experience is first-personal, it is not exhausted by one vocabulary, it is physically realized, and it is evidence for an ontologically independent source. None entails the next without argument.

The positive case is cumulative. Conscious availability changes under anesthesia and neural injury; affect and salience change under pharmacology; the organization of access and report changes with neural connectivity; mystical-type states can be occasioned by drugs and shaped by expectation; personal prayer recruits ordinary social-cognitive systems; and religious interpretation varies with learned models and cultural framing. These findings do not deductively prove identity theory, eliminate the explanatory gap, or show that every religious experience is mistaken. They do show systematic intervention-sensitive dependence. That pattern is more expected if cherished human states are achievements of embodied organisms than if their first-person character itself supplies public evidence of independence from embodiment.

The conclusion is therefore calibrated but consequential. Irreducibility is not independence, higher-level reality is not a separate substance, and value is not a residue of ignorance. A dualist or religious account may remain possible, but it must supply a discriminating bridge or evidence beyond the phenomenology it shares with embodied alternatives. Explanation does not empty experience. It locates the conditions under which experience becomes possible, vulnerable, and valuable.

Keywords: physicalism; consciousness; embodiment; religious experience; philosophy of mind; dualism; explanatory gap; Christian apologetics

1 The Rhetorical Slide

Frank Turek gives the target argument an unusually clear public form. In a 2021 podcast transcript he contrasts human reason with being “molecules in motion” or “moist robots,” contends that physically governed cognition would be reaction rather than reasoning, and later calls love an immaterial reality grounded in the divine (Turek 2021). Related apologetic works place reason, intentionality, morality, and conscious life inside a cumulative case for theism and Christianity (Geisler and Turek 2004; Turek 2014). The rhetoric is effective because it combines a philosophical question with an existential threat. If thought is physically realized, the listener is invited to fear, thought is not really rational; if love has bodily conditions, love is not really love.

That invitation depends on a slide. An experience may be private in access, qualitative in character, intentional in content, normatively assessable, causally important, and not usefully described at the molecular level. None of those features is synonymous with being produced by, housed in, or evidentially connected to an independent spiritual substance. The argument moves from *not adequately described in this vocabulary* to *not physically realized*, then from *not physically realized* to *evidence for a spiritual realm*, and often from that broad realm to a Christian God-concept. Each move needs its own bridge.

The target is therefore narrower than “religion” and broader than one quotation. It is an evidential pattern: use the felt importance or first-person depth of a state as positive evidence for a spiritual source, while treating an embodied account as existentially self-defeating. Christian substance dualists offer more developed arguments than this slogan. Moreland and Rae, for example, defend a soul-body distinction through arguments about personal identity, mental properties, agency, and ethics rather than resting everything on emotional elevation (Moreland and Rae 2000). Those arguments deserve assessment on their own terms. The present paper asks what the ordinary appeal to cherished experience can establish before such additional work is done.

The governing thesis is straightforward. Embodied dependence is not merely compatible with conscious and affective life; it is a stable feature of the public evidence. First-person character supplies no independent bridge to spiritual ontology. Taken together, those points shift the burden: anyone who treats love, awe, rationality, or religious feeling as evidence of independence from embodiment must identify what discriminates that interpretation from embodied alternatives.

The immateriality slide

From “this experience cannot be replaced by a third-person description” it does not follow that “this experience exists independently of embodied processes.” From either claim it still does not follow that the experience is public evidence for a spiritual realm or a specific God-concept. Every arrow requires support.

2 Four Claims That Must Be Kept Apart

The phrase *physicalism* covers a family of views, not the demand that every true sentence be rewritten in particle physics. A physicalist may hold that persons are wholly part of the physical world while also treating biological, psychological, social, semantic, and normative explanations as indispensable. Fodor’s defense of the special sciences is a classic statement of why higher-level kinds can support real generalizations even when physically realized (Fodor 1974). Searle likewise insists on the first-person ontology of consciousness while rejecting a separate Cartesian substance and locating consciousness among biological features of brains (Searle 1992). These positions differ sharply, but both block the caricature that embodiment reduces every human truth to a list of molecules.

At least four claims recur in the debate:

1. **First-person character:** there is something it is like for the subject to feel pain, love, awe, or grief.
2. **Explanatory irreducibility:** a vocabulary of neurons or molecules may not replace personal, semantic, or normative explanation without loss.
3. **Physical realization or dependence:** the state occurs through an embodied system and changes when relevant parts of that system change.
4. **Ontological independence:** the state or subject can exist, act, or retain its identity independently of the embodied system.

The first two do not contradict the third. A legal promise is not adequately described as ink distribution, yet its human existence depends on embodied agents, shared practices, memory, language, and institutions. A melody is not usefully identified by an inventory of air molecules, yet its occurrence requires a realized pattern. A chess tactic is defined by rules and intentions, not wood chemistry, while every played instance is physically implemented. Higher-level truth and physical realization answer different questions.

The point is not that the legal, musical, or chess examples solve consciousness. They expose an invalid rule: “If a low-level description does not preserve a phenomenon’s salient properties, the phenomenon must be a separate substance.” That rule would multiply substances wherever levels of explanation differ. Embodied and enactive approaches instead take lived experience seriously while studying cognition as the activity of organisms in environments (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). Damasio’s work on emotion and reasoning similarly undermines the picture of rational thought as a pure faculty merely carried around by a body; affective and bodily regulation help constitute competent judgment (Damasio 2005).

Explanation can of course become eliminative if it denies the phenomenon it was meant to explain. But locating a phenomenon is not denying it. The relevant question is whether an account preserves the

causal, phenomenal, semantic, and normative patterns for which the higher-level term is used. “Love involves embodied attachment and regulation” does not mean “love is unreal.” It means that love is accomplished by vulnerable living beings rather than imported into them from elsewhere.

3 Embodied Dependence as Positive Evidence

The evidential case is not one dramatic brain scan. It is the convergence of interventions and dependencies across different domains. A correlation between one neural signal and one report would be weak. Reversible abolition, selective impairment, dose-sensitive modulation, connectivity-sensitive access, learned framing, and cross-context variation form a more substantial pattern. Table 1 states the contribution and limit of each strand.

Table 1: Cumulative evidence for embodied dependence and its proper limit.

Evidence strand	Embodied expectation	Observed pressure	What it does not prove
Anesthesia and conscious access	Targeted changes to neural dynamics should alter availability and integration.	Pharmacological interventions can reversibly remove or reorganize conscious processing.	No single anesthetic mechanism establishes a complete metaphysics of experience.
Injury and degeneration	Damage to enabling systems should selectively change memory, affect, agency, and personality.	Mental capacities and the practical expression of personhood vary with location, severity, and progression.	Dependence does not by itself entail strict type identity or settle survival claims.
Psychedelics and salience	Chemical perturbation plus context should alter felt unity, sacredness, and personal significance.	Controlled psilocybin sessions can occasion enduring mystical-type reports.	Drug occasioning neither proves nor disproves the reported state’s ultimate interpretation.
Callosal disconnection	Altered information flow should change access, report, and coordination.	Split-brain work reveals divided perceptual access amid contested evidence about unified consciousness.	The findings do not warrant the simple claim that surgery creates two persons.
Prayer and religious cognition	Learned relational models should recruit ordinary social and predictive systems.	Personal prayer and spiritual interpretation engage social cognition, expectation, and interoceptive weighting.	A neural mechanism does not show that every religious belief is false.

Anesthesia provides an especially clean intervention because conscious availability can disappear and return as the physical condition changes. The mechanisms are complex and agents do not simply flip one universal “consciousness switch.” Still, the review by Alkire, Hudetz, and Tononi connects anesthetic loss of consciousness to disrupted neural integration and information capacity (Alkire, Hudetz, and Tononi 2008). Contemporary workspace models likewise test access and report through distributed recurrent processing rather than treating awareness as untouched by neural organization (Mashour et al. 2020). One need not accept any single theory to see the comparative pressure: conscious access behaves like something implemented in a dynamically coordinated system.

Damage and disconnection refine the point. Gazzaniga’s review documents how callosal separation changes interhemispheric communication, lateralized access, and interpretive behavior (Gazzaniga 2000). Later work warns against converting those findings into the easy slogan that every split-brain patient contains two independent consciousnesses; some patients show divided perception alongside apparently unified conscious agency (Pinto et al. 2017). That correction strengthens the argument’s discipline. The claim is not that one surgery proves a metaphysics. It is that the architecture of access and report changes with the architecture of communication. A soul posited to explain unity must do more than rename whatever unity remains.

Pharmacology makes the same dependence vivid at the level of meaning and sacredness. In controlled conditions, psilocybin has occasioned experiences that participants classified as mystical and personally significant long afterward (Griffiths et al. 2006). This result does not debunk the experience. It blocks a shortcut from intensity, unity, ineffability, or sacred feeling to a uniquely supernatural cause. The same phenomenological marks can arise through an intervention whose timing and dose are physically controlled, while their interpretation remains shaped by setting and expectation.

Religious cognition is also continuous with ordinary social and predictive systems. Functional imaging of personal prayer in highly religious participants found recruitment of areas associated with social cognition (Schjoedt et al. 2009). A broader predictive-processing review relates religious experience to interacting mechanisms of interoception, agency attribution, social cognition, expectation, and error monitoring rather than to one specialized religious module (Elk and Aleman 2017). Again, mechanism is not refutation. The public lesson is mediation: an experience may be sincere, transformative, and representationally rich while its occurrence and content remain shaped by embodied systems.

The strands converge because they differ. Anesthesia concerns availability; injury concerns capacity; pharmacology concerns affect and salience; callosal disconnection concerns information access; practice and culture concern content and interpretation. An embodied account expects all of these dimensions to be vulnerable to changes in the realizing organism and its learned environment. A view that cites phenomenology as evidence of independence must explain why its supposed evidence so reliably follows the embodied profile.

4 Irreducibility Without Independence

The strongest philosophical reply is not that neuroscience is irrelevant. It is that dependence leaves the central mystery untouched. Levine named an “explanatory gap” between physical accounts and qualitative character (Levine 1983). Chalmers developed the hard problem: even a complete account of cognitive functions may seem to leave unanswered why physical processing is accompanied by experience at all (Chalmers 1996). These arguments prevent triumphalism. A map of neural dependence is not yet an explanation of why pain hurts or red looks as it does.

But a gap is not a destination. From “current physical explanation does not entail phenomenal character” it does not follow that “phenomenal character is produced by an immaterial soul,” still less that it is grounded by the Christian deity. The gap underdetermines ontology. Property dualism, panpsychism, neutral monism, emergentism, biological naturalism, representational theories, illusionism, and future physicalist accounts all respond differently. An unsolved problem for a broad family does not become positive evidence for whichever rival is named next.

This distinction also matters for reason. Turek’s worry is that physically realized cognition would be reaction rather than reasoning (Turek 2021). Yet reasons can be causes at the personal level while neural events realize the reasoning process. A person revises a belief because a premise conflicts with evidence; the episode also has a physical implementation. Describing the implementation does not erase the norm that the conclusion should follow. It becomes a threat only if one assumes, rather than argues, that a process cannot be both physically realized and rationally assessable.

The physicalist still owes accounts of content, normativity, agency, and conscious character. Churchland’s neurophilosophical program is valuable here not because it declares every problem solved but because it makes philosophical proposals answerable to the organized evidence of nervous systems (Churchland 1986). The corresponding burden falls on dualism. If an independent mind contributes to cognition, what difference does that contribution make beyond the capacities already tracking neural organization? “The neural story is incomplete” and “an independent soul supplies the missing cause” are not the same proposition.

5 The Missing Bridge Principle

The evidential shortcut can now be stated openly:

1. Conscious experience has first-person character and is not exhausted by a third-person description.
2. Whatever has that character is evidence for an independent spiritual reality.
3. Therefore conscious experience is evidence for an independent spiritual reality.

The form is valid, but premise 2 is the entire controversy. Pain, dreams, moods, melodies-as-heard, mathematical insight, and grief all have first-person or meaning-laden aspects. Treating each as evidence for a spiritual realm simply repeats the disputed rule. If the rule is weakened to “some profound experiences are spiritual,” a criterion is still needed to distinguish spiritual source from embodied construction, culturally trained attention, memory, expectation, or ordinary perception.

The comparative burden is more demanding than logical compatibility. An embodied account predicts that availability, content, integration, and salience will vary with changes to the organism and its environment. Many spiritual accounts can be made compatible with that pattern by saying that a soul normally operates through a brain. Compatibility, however, is cheap. To turn dependence into positive support for independence, the theory must predict some contrast that the embodied account does not predict equally well.

This is why “correlation is not identity” is both true and insufficient. It blocks a deductive inference from neural covariance to strict identity. It does not reverse the evidential direction and make covariance evidence for independence. The public record still needs a reason to prefer the additional entity or source. Without one, the spiritual interpretation is possible but evidentially idle in this argument.

The comparative burden

If an alleged spiritual contribution makes no independently identifiable difference to the availability, content, integration, or accuracy of experience, then the first-person character shared by spiritual and embodied interpretations cannot discriminate between them. Possibility remains; positive public support does not.

6 The Strongest Replies

6.1 Dependence is only an instrument relation

A dualist may compare the brain to an instrument: damage the violin and the musician’s performance changes, though the musician remains distinct. The analogy shows logical possibility, not explanatory parity. We independently observe musicians, instruments, and their interaction. In the mind-body case, the proposed player is introduced to explain capacities whose detailed availability already varies with the instrument. The analogy gains force only when accompanied by evidence of the player that is not itself inferred from the music.

This reply can still guide research. A dualist might predict preserved cognition where the embodied account predicts its loss, information acquired without ordinary access, or mental causation with a stable signature not captured by neural organization. Such proposals may fail, succeed, or require refinement. What matters is that they risk a contrast. The immateriality slide supplies none.

6.2 The hard problem supports a nonphysical property

The hard problem may indeed motivate nonphysical theories. The present argument does not declare those theories false. It denies that explanatory difficulty selects a spiritual realm, personal survival, or Christian theism without additional premises. Chalmers’s own discussion opens a much wider metaphysical space

than popular apologetic rhetoric usually acknowledges (Chalmers 1996). A defender who moves from the hard problem to one religious ontology must explain why that ontology outperforms the other nonreductive options and how it accounts for systematic embodiment.

6.3 Religious experience is perceptual seeming

Alston offers a serious epistemology of Christian mystical perception, asking whether established doxastic practices can provide *prima facie* justification rather than treating every experience as a proof for outsiders (Alston 1991). That is a stronger position than the immateriality slide because it distinguishes personal justification, defeaters, and practice-relative evaluation. Yet it also reveals the limit of the public argument. A seeming may justify a subject unless defeated while still failing to discriminate publicly among incompatible source interpretations. Drug occasioning, social-cognitive mediation, tradition-specific content, and cross-cultural symmetry become relevant defeaters or undercutters; intensity alone does not decide among them.

6.4 Christianity need not despise embodiment

Correct. Many Christian anthropologies emphasize creation, incarnation, bodily resurrection, sacrament, or psychosomatic unity. Some reject substance dualism; others treat embodiment as the normal condition of human agency. The paper does not argue that Christianity entails a ghostly contempt for bodies. It argues that an apologist cannot use the beauty of embodied states as evidence against embodiment while later appealing to an embodied theology. If the richer theology accepts that love and reason are bodily achievements, it has abandoned the existential caricature even if it retains other reasons for theism.

7 What Would Actually Discriminate?

The demand for a bridge is not the demand that spiritual claims be laboratory objects before they can be rational. Historical, testimonial, philosophical, and experiential evidence can all matter. The question is whether the evidence is more expected under the proposed spiritual account than under serious embodied alternatives. Table 2 identifies forms of evidence that would at least address the right burden.

Table 2: From compatibility to discrimination.

Proposed evidence	Why it could matter	What would remain necessary
Reliable cognition where an embodied model predicts specific incapacity	Risks a contrast between an independent contribution and substrate dependence	Prospective criteria, replication, and exclusion of residual function or information leakage
Accurate novel information obtained without ordinary access	Could connect experience to a source beyond memory, cueing, and inference	Controlled protocols, clear base rates, and independent verification
A cross-context signature uniquely predicted by a spiritual theory	Gives the theory content beyond retrospective compatibility	A specified mechanism or expectation and comparison with cultural and cognitive models
A philosophical bridge from phenomenology to independence	Would supply the missing premise rather than treating it as obvious	Defense against counterexamples and an account of why one spiritual ontology is selected

None of these rows guarantees success. Their value is methodological: each asks a spiritual account to identify an expected difference. By contrast, “love feels too profound to be physical” supplies no prospective criterion. Every possible embodied discovery can be absorbed by saying that the soul uses

the discovered mechanism. A claim protected in that way may remain coherent, but the discoveries no longer confirm it.

The same standard must be applied symmetrically. A physicalist should not declare victory merely because a neural correlate exists. The physicalist account must explain why the correlate matters, how organization supports the capacity, which interventions change it, and where present models fail. The difference is that embodied hypotheses already generate a wide network of risky expectations: altering the realizing system should alter the realized capacity in structured ways. The cumulative record broadly fits that expectation.

8 The Existential Boomerang

The “molecules in motion” rhetoric succeeds only if physical realization is treated as humiliation. That judgment is not a scientific result or a logical consequence. It is an aesthetic premise smuggled into the debate. No one thinks a symphony becomes worthless upon learning about vibration, hearing, training, memory, and cultural form. Its value resides in the organized achievement, not in exemption from a physical world.

Love is similar but more demanding. It involves attention, vulnerability, memory, regulation, interpretation, mutual history, action, and repair. Embodiment makes these achievements possible and exposes them to loss. Injury, depression, dementia, trauma, and drugs can deform or interrupt the relevant capacities; care, practice, medicine, community, and time can sometimes restore them. That vulnerability does not cheapen love. It explains part of its moral urgency.

The same point applies to reason. A reliable inference is not made unreliable merely by having a mechanism. Reliability depends on how the mechanism responds to evidence, detects conflict, preserves information, and permits correction. We distrust a process when it is insensitive to truth-relevant differences, not when it has causes. An uncaused or nonphysical judgment would not become rational merely by lacking a neural description.

Religious experience deserves the same respect. An embodied account need not mock prayerful calm, awe, repentance, or felt presence. It can ask how attention, breathing, expectation, attachment, social cognition, architecture, music, and inherited concepts organize the experience. That inquiry may illuminate why the state matters and why it varies. To call the result “nothing but chemistry” is not an argument against the account. It is a refusal to see what organized living matter can do.

The existential accusation therefore boomerangs. The apologetic view claims to protect meaning by moving its source elsewhere, yet it borrows every example from embodied life. Physicalism need not empty the chest. It can locate the treasure in organisms capable of feeling, interpreting, committing, grieving, and changing. A spiritual account may add another dimension, but it must earn that addition without first declaring the embodied achievement worthless.

9 Conclusion

The immateriality slide conflates four questions: whether experience is first-personal, whether one explanatory vocabulary exhausts it, whether it is physically realized, and whether it supplies evidence for an independent spiritual source. Keeping those questions separate dissolves the rhetorical shortcut. Inner does not mean independent. Higher-level does not mean disembodied. Difficult to explain does not mean evidence for a named ontology.

The cumulative public record then adds positive pressure. Conscious availability, affect, integration, salience, report, and interpretation vary in structured ways with anesthesia, injury, pharmacology, connectivity, practice, and culture. These strands do not prove strict identity theory or settle the hard problem. They do favor embodied-dependence accounts over an inference that treats phenomenological depth itself as evidence of independence.

The rational change requested is modest but firm. Stop counting love, awe, reason, and religious feeling as automatic evidence against embodiment. A dualist or religious theory may offer a bridge, a risky prediction, or independent evidence. Until it does, cherished experience belongs to the common evidential ground. Explanation does not make that experience less real. It shows how much living systems accomplish—and how much is at stake when they are harmed.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Ordinary-language reconstruction

- P1.** First-person character or explanatory irreducibility supports an independent spiritual ontology only if some defensible bridge makes that feature more expected under the spiritual interpretation than under embodied alternatives.
- P2.** The immateriality slide supplies no such bridge; it moves from inner, valuable, or irreducible experience to spiritual evidence by relabeling the phenomenon.
- P3.** The availability, content, integration, and salience of cherished experiences vary systematically under neural, bodily, pharmacological, social, and interpretive conditions.
- P4.** That intervention-sensitive pattern is expected under embodied-dependence accounts and is not converted into evidence for independence merely because a spiritual account can accommodate it.
- P5.** Therefore the first-person depth of cherished experience does not by itself provide public evidence for an independent spiritual ontology, and the cumulative dependence pattern favors embodied accounts over that apologetic shortcut.
- P6.** This conclusion does not prove exhaustive physicalism or refute every dualist theory; an independently supported bridge or discriminating evidence could alter the comparison.

A.2 Symbols

For any experience e :

- $Q(e)$: e has first-person qualitative character or is not exhausted by third-person description;
- $R(e)$: e is systematically realized in or modulated by embodied processes;
- $S(e)$: e supplies public evidence for an ontologically independent spiritual source; and
- I : the apologetic bridge claiming that every Q -experience thereby supplies S -evidence.

A.3 Symbolic reconstruction

$$I \equiv \forall e [Q(e) \rightarrow S(e)].$$

Plain-English annotation. The shortcut is a universal bridge: whenever an experience has first-person depth or resists replacement by a third-person description, that feature is taken to support an independent spiritual source. Writing the bridge openly shows that the conclusion is not contained in the description of the experience.

$$Q(e) \wedge R(e) \not\Rightarrow S(e).$$

Plain-English annotation. An experience can be both genuinely first-personal and systematically embodied without those two facts entailing a spiritual source. The formula does not say that a spiritual interpretation is impossible. It says the shared phenomenology and dependence pattern do not establish that interpretation by themselves.

$$\exists e [Q(e) \wedge \neg S(e)] \rightarrow \neg I.$$

Plain-English annotation. One defensible counterexample defeats the universal bridge. Ordinary pain, dreaming, or grief can have irreducible first-person character without thereby serving as public evidence for an independent spiritual realm. The symbolic result invalidates the shortcut; the broader comparative case still depends on the empirical evidence reviewed in the paper.

A.4 Validity and premise support

The formal work has two parts. First, the universal bridge I is refuted if even one Q -experience lacks the alleged S -support. This is a deductive point about the shortcut: first-person character does not contain spiritual evidence as a matter of logical form. The ordinary-language argument makes the same point conditionally. If public support requires a discriminating bridge, and neither phenomenology alone nor mere compatibility supplies one, then the shortcut fails.

Second, the comparative conclusion is defeasible rather than deductively certain. Its premises are supported cumulatively by intervention-sensitive dependence across conscious availability, affect, access, salience, and interpretation. A dualist could challenge that expectedness judgment or supply independent evidence that changes the comparison. The scope premise therefore matters: the argument defeats an automatic inference and favors embodied-dependence accounts over that inference; it does not convert present neuroscience into a deductive disproof of every nonphysical view.

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